

Assassination Prompts Algerians To Question Army Policy, Focus

By Jonathan C. Randal
Washington Post Foreign Service

ALGIERS—For many Algerians, the most troubling fact about last week's assassination of head of state Mohammed Boudiaf was that the man identified as the apparent assassin was a junior officer in an elite army security unit who had Muslim "religious convictions."

The report that an army officer had pulled the trigger seemed to confirm recurring rumors here that the army, long considered the regime's ultimate bulwark against chaos, was as subject as the rest of society to the Islamic fundamentalist virus.

In Algeria, an old saw states, "Other countries have an army; here the army has the country." Officially, that army, which effectively has run Algeria from behind the scenes since independence 30 years ago, was silent when confronted with evidence of the seeming penetration of its ranks by the very fundamentalists it has sworn publicly to eradicate.

The army had never formally named the fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front as the enemy. But in January, it ousted president Chadli Bendjedid to prevent the front from winning Algeria's first free parliamentary elections. Then it brought war hero Boudiaf back from self-imposed exile to lend legitimacy to what became known as a "constitutional coup d'etat."

Boudiaf and Defense Minister Khaled Nezzar later banned the front, arrested its leaders and sent thousands of militants to Sahara detention camps.

Indeed, only two days before Boudiaf's assassination, the regime had brought before a military tribunal the Islamic Salvation Front's top leaders—Abbasi Madani, Ali Belhadj and five others—on capital charges of seeking to overthrow the government and replace it with an Islamic republic in June 1991.

Conspiracy theories on Boudiaf's assassination soon emerged, laying blame variously on mysterious military and civilian power brokers or alleged skullduggery by Bendjedid and the discredited National Liberation Front, which monopolized power until 1990.

Some accusations also were directed at the army. Indeed, a senior Algerian source said so many people "were accusing the army of bringing Boudiaf back, using him and then getting rid of him" that the government set up an impartial, three-man panel of the slain leader's associates to investigate his death and "convince the people [the army] had nothing to do with it."

In dealing with the succession, Nezzar and his fellow generals, traditionally shy of the limelight, brushed aside hard-line suggestions that they impose an outright military regime by invoking the ultimate bulwark argument.

Instead, the military-backed government chose Ali Kafi, the head of the Algerian veterans' organization,

who is not expected to fulfill Boudiaf's promise of "radical change" for a people fed up with soaring inflation and unemployment, economic mismanagement and revolving-door governments. Kafi, however, has the political connections capable of initiating a national reconciliation with the Islamic fundamentalists.

Even Nezzar has favored such a dialogue, according to key diplomats and political observers, despite his call a week ago for the "eradicating" of fundamentalist extremists.

The generals are said to be concerned about the army's cohesion. They are mindful that younger officers are having second thoughts about the yearlong state of emergency decreed in February, which has cost the lives of some 100 soldiers and policemen.

The generals also know the regime now is more beholden than ever to France, Italy, Spain and other Western governments, which have thrown good money after bad in helping successive Algerian administrations.

Even before Boudiaf's assassination, foreign business hesitated to make major investments because of Algeria's political instability and a \$24 billion foreign debt devouring 70 percent of foreign-exchange earnings—which come from oil and natural gas exports.

In such circumstances, the fundamentalists have everything to gain by keeping their heads down and waiting for further unraveling of Algeria's social fabric.